

## **Mackenzie**

### **DIARY OF FR. BERNARD BROWN**

With five youths from Rochester, U.S.A., who had volunteered for Mission work in the Vicariate of Mackenzie, Fr. Brown made his way down the Mackenzie by canoe as far as Norman Wells.

\* August 7th 1962 is the day we finally quit our 1500 mile river trip and flew inland to our destination Colville Lake. We had made the final fifty miles from Fort Norman to Norman Wells in our freight canoe the day before and pitched our tent on the beach. Now we found ourselves, Father Brown, Brian Martin and Frank Wratni, jammed into the small cabin of a Beaver aircraft between our seven sled dogs, fighting for enough altitude to clear the Mackenzie Mountains east of the Mighty Mackenzie River and using a king-size frying pan to quell incipient fights among our dogs. The other three members of our expedition: Frank McDermott, Barry Haefele and Bob Haughwout were to fly into the Wells the same day and join Father Brown whom the pilot assured would be picked up later in the day and returned.

The welcome we received on the muskeg shore of blue Colville Lake was tremendous, the entire population turned out to shake our hands, all twenty of them! But their welcome was sincere and we felt at home from the start. They helped us unload the dogs from the plane and tie them to the short willows as there are no trees in the area. Then we

were led to the logs they had cut during the winter and hauled with their sleds. The site was high and dry but too far back from the water. Father BROWN quickly picked out a spot along the lake front just north of the settlement and decided the Mission to be built there. The settlement consisted of three log cabins and eleven tents plus five new log cabins in the process of building. It was an up and coming town.

Father BROWN was to be picked up later that afternoon after picking out the Mission site and getting the dogs staked out and the big tent pitched, but as so often happens in the North, the four hours turned out to be four days. He had come in nothing but his cassock and had to borrow a sleeping bag from the Indians. They were very kind and considerate in bringing a stove and wood, ducks and fish all cleaned and ready to cook, bannock (their bread), and even cut and layed a beautiful fragrant floor of spruce boughs in our tent. Those four days were put to good use; all the land was cleared of small willows right down to the lake; a seventy-two foot dock was built out into the lake so that planes carrying our building supplies could land them near at hand, we had set up housekeeping in the big 16 x 20 tent. In short a beach-head had been established and all was set for the major landing. On Friday afternoon the cry « Ellakinareta » went up around the settlement... « Airplane », an event, and a welcome one for Father BROWN who pictured his missing three boys waiting patiently in the tent near the canoe at Norman Wells wondering when they would continue to Fort Good Hope. But bigger than the surprise of the plane itself was the first passenger to set down on the pontoon... Barry Haefele, followed by the other two missing members, Frank McDermott and Bob Haughwout. They had caught a ride with

the R.C.M.P. boat from the Wells to Good Hope and towed the canoe with them and chartered a plane. Finally Fr. BROWN and the five boys were again together after being separated a Fort Smith two weeks before. But not for long, Father BROWN boarded the returning plane and flew to Fort Good Hope where he spent the next few days receiving a boatload of supplies and storing them for plane lift to Colville. During this time the great feast of August 15th arrived and with it the Bishop to confer Confirmation on the children of the Fort. At the same time Father LEISING flying the Missions own Beaver aircraft was free to make a few trips in to Colville Lake and he and Father BROWN flew in with a load on the evening of the 14th and returned again the following morning before the boys were up with a half ton of canned food and cement. Following trips brought in lumber (cut to eight feet to fit in the cabin), a cast iron stove, two tons of roofing, fish nets, dog harness, chain, saw etc. The feast of the Assumption is not a holy day of Obligation in Canada, so as soon as the supplies were unloaded work got under way on the foundations of the new Mission. But that night Father said his first Mass at Colville Lake in the big tent with a case of powdered milk for a tabernacle and illumination from the candles. The tent was full and eleven of the natives received Holy Communion. The Church had at long last come to Colville Lake to stay.

August 16, 17 - 18 were spent hauling gravel on our backs to form a base for the cement footings of the log Mission. The idea is to insulate the permafrost a foot below the muskeg so that the heat of the building will not melt it. During this backbreaking labour the black flies were most annoying but their days were now numbered. All the canoes on Colville Lake are homemade by the

Indians, and now one of them was pressed into service hauling rocks and sand and gravel from a small beach three miles away.

Father LEISING returned from Aklavik and Inuvik of Friday and made four solo trips that day from Good Hope 100 miles south hauling in more of our building supplies. On the following day the women went out in their large canoe and came back with a load of spruce tops with which they wove a new floor for our large tent.

On Sunday August 19th after the usual 9.30 a.m. « High » Mass during which Father preached to a full tent in their language, the five Rochester boys were invited by the local Indian boys for a fishing trip. Father stayed home to work on the plans of the Mission. Instead he found himself entertaining the people who came all day long to visit. The boys returned late with some beautiful fish weighing up to ten pounds. It was the last warm day we had. Even the moss underfoot seemed warm although there was permanent ice just a foot below the surface. The big bell Father LEISING brought from Arctic Red River sounded again in the evening to call the people to the evening Rosary. Of course they all come because they like this devotion and there are no distractions we associate with « civilization » such as radios and television. These people didn't even have a piano or violin, no magazines or newspapers. They know nothing of the great bomb threat that worries the outside world nor of international tensions. There are no ulcers at Colville Lake.

Father BROWN bears the first name of the great Doctor of Clairvaux, Bernard, and so August 20th was his Feast of « Names Day », as it is known in the Mackenzie Vicariate. This called for something special, but what? We had nothing with which to celebrate. No holiday could be called because the

work of pouring the cement of the footings had to be done before freeze-up. Then suddenly out of the blue came an unexpected plane bearing four Mounties and the mail including several boxes of sweets from the Sisters in the States. The R.C.M.P. had come to vaccinate the sled dogs for rabies. They brought fifty shots with them but ran short when they found that the dog population at Colville Lake was sixty-six!

The evening after Mass the men of the camp stayed on to smoke cigars (found in a parcel of sweets from Sister Mary Timothy R.S.M.). The women and children ate candy on their way back to their tents. It was the first feast day we had celebrated at our new home.

August 21st: work continued under clear skies and a moderate S.E wind. Father taught Brian Martin how to handle the chain saw when he and Barry Haefele began building the privy. Isidore Cochon and Frank Codzie were peeling logs, Bob Haughwout, Frank McDermott, Martin Oudzie, and Joe Codzie were packing dirt and moss on their backs to cover the gravel; the cement pads (21 of them) were cast on. Frank Wratni crossed the Lake with Paul Cotchille, Alfred Masezumi and Louis Oudzie to try to find some trees 32 feet high which were needed under the Mission as foundation for the log walls. They found a few eight miles along the shore, cut them and towed them back.

And then again that magic cry of « Ellakinareta » echoed around the settlement as a plane was spotted coming from the south. No sound was heard as yet, just a tiny pin point on the southern horizon. The plane turned out to be a big one as far as our watery airport was concerned: an « Otter » piloted by Bob Inglis of North West Territorial Airways carrying a ton of gas from Norman Wells to fuel our future generator which would enable us to go on

the « air » when we got our transmitter. This huge plane grounded some twenty feet off the end of our dock and some of the boys had to jump into the cool water and help unload the ten gallon kegs until the pontoons were off the bottom and the plane could be pulled into the dock. This plane made two more trips to Fort Good Hope hauling more of the freight that had arrived there by river boat from Waterways a thousand miles south. That night we were entertained by a brilliant display of Northern Lights rivalling the fireworks at Charlotte on the Feast of St. Anthony. The boys were particularly impressed by the vivid greens. They sat outside the tent until midnight as the temperature fell to 45.

Wednesday August 22nd. We can now stay in our sleeping bags an extra hour as we have acquired a cook! She is Sarah and she comes at six, builds a huge fire in our castiron heater and cooks a wonderful breakfast of oatmeal and coffee. The Otter returned early carrying our eighteen canoe on its pontoon. Now we can put out our net. Six of the men cross the Lake again, this time to cut fire-killed dry spruce for our ceiling and roof rafters. The continuing S-E wind keeps the black flies away and we can work in peace at last. The pilot and his mechanic come up to the tent for lunch and tell us of the gold rush now in progress east of us at Contoyto Lake. They have been flying prospectors in there in droves 250 miles north of their base in Yellowknife. They say the gold runs 3 ounces to the ton and was discovered by a geologist working from an aircraft for one of the big mining companies. It is the first major gold strike in the Territories in the past fifteen years.

On the second trip of the aircraft came two young Indian boys who hitch-hiked on the promise that they would pay their passage by working to help build the Mission! This brings our crew to 13. Now it

becomes a problem every morning for Father to place his workers and get the work under way.

Thursday August 23rd. This morning the Mission took a giant step forward with the laying of the floor joists, huge dry logs cut during the previous winter and hauled miles by dog teams. They will support tons. Now if only we had the floor boards to cover them! But we are pressed for time and must go to build up our wall logs hoping we will get some lumber by plane before freeze-up.

Friday, August 24th spelled the end of summer and the beginning of fall. A sudden violent change in the weather kept us pinned in our tents, prisoners of the storm. The wind shifted to the N.W and sent waves crashing over our frail log pier and washed away all the fill we had built up along the bank to hold our fish house. The temperature is near freezing and the driving rain is finding many holes in our tent we had not suspected were there. The boys skipped breakfast and stayed warm in their sleeping bags. We could not work outside anyway. Later in the day we moved one of the stoves inside the tent and this gave us great comfort. It was definitely the end of the brief summer, which had seen the winters ice melt from the Lake only last month.

Saturday August 25th broke gray and cold but the wind was down. We started work an hour earlier and fumbled around in heavy mits and jackets. But little by little we warmed to the work. Six of the men crossed the lake to cut spruce with which to build our fish house. Father and Louis spent the day levelling the floor joists, always the hardest job of building a log building. Using a level and axes they cut here and there, levelling as they went, until at sundown the thousand square foot floor of the main building was dead level and ready for flooring.

Sunday August 26th... again that cold rain is falling on us, pinging on the hot stove pipe and beating a melancholy background to the Sunday morning sermon. But in spite of the weather the men must get out to their nets and harness their dogs to haul firewood on the bare ground as they have been busy all week working on Our Lady Of The Snows. Charlie Masezumi brought in 80 trout from his net while out in front of the settlement there was a running gun fight with water fowl all day long to secure fresh meat, and just about every belt had a supper of ducks beneath it when the bell sounded for evening Rosary at eight-thirty.

Afterwards Father and Barry were playing chess on a tiny six by six inch board when Bob Haughwout complained of shooting pains in his right arm and Alfred Masezumi had the same symptoms in his legs, the results of slivers and scratches that had infected and resulted in blood poisoning. Father turned doctor and administered penicillin.

Monday morning at four Bob woke the tent with his screaming; the result of the fever brought on by blood poisoning. Barry Haefele woke Father up but there was little to be done. Frank Wratni and Brian Martin could not get back to sleep and took the canoe and visited our net, again loaded with trout. Bob got his Aquinas ring cut off his swollen hand and gradually slept again. The temperature had now dropped to four degrees above freezing.

It was a blue Monday in many ways. The cold N.W wind with intermittent rain made work doubly difficult. Some were cutting more spruce in the bush across the Lake, some were peeling bark off logs and finally some were actually putting the first wall logs up.

Tuesday was worse, with the drizzle gradually freezing and stopping work in the afternoon. Father Brown had to retreat from the Mission itself but

got the boys busy helping him cut boards inside the tent to build the cross and steeple.

Wednesday August 29th: Today out of the blue came the Arctic School-Bus! An Otter aircraft chartered by the Department of Education at Inuvik to pick up the Indian and Eskimo children for the fall term. They are returned to their doorstep again in June. The plane came in empty except for three precious parcels for our group. One contained a few heads of cabbage from Father ADAM's garden in Inuvik, another was full of fresh bread and the third a cake! This was a rare event. A real cake arriving at Colville Lake! We stood on the dock waving as a tenth of our population left us for the winter, two girls and a boy.

In the afternoon the wind miraculously dropped giving us a chance we needed to rearrange our outside stockpile of building materials which were covered with polythene and badly damaged. One of the Indian women sewed another foot of canvass on the bottom of Father's tent so that he could stand up inside.

August 30th was a cold and extremely windy Thursday. Six men started hauling green logs up the bank from the water when a cry went up from one of them who had accidentally slipped with his sharp ax and cut a deep gash above the knee. Father BROWN was again pressed into service as doctor and put a few stitches in the injured man's leg. He was back on the job in fifteen minutes.

Although the wind was terrific and kept blowing the smoke back down our wood stove chimney and ripping up our tent pegs, still the work went well and by suppertime we had five logs up on the walls. A normal log cabin has only four walls and five logs up wouldn't mean much. But the Mission we are building is seventy feet long by thirty-two at its widest point and has twelve logs notched around

at each level. So to raise it by only one log which may be six inches means cutting and fitting at least one and hundred fifty feet of logs.

The wind died after supper and Frank Wratni and Brian Martin went out to visit the net. The storm had wound it in knots. Only three fish were left in it and it had to be pulled up and brought in for repairs. As the days shortened and the nights lengthened our life here on this Arctic Lake became more and more dependant upon the elements. The wind and the rain dictated when and for how long we could go ahead with our project; when we could take fish for the dogs and ourselves, when we would go to bed wet, when we would be smoked out of the tent etc. And in this we were sharing the life of the natives, their same cares, their battle for survival. Day by day we were becoming more like them, feeling very small in a great, large, open country, praying next to them every evening to the God of the Universe, asking Him to temper the elements and still the winds. It made us humble.

Friday, August 21st 1962 was a day to remember for many reasons, some good, some bad. The day broke cold and windy as usual with snow covering the hills across the Lake. Sarah, our Rabbit-Skin cook was ill, and we were not aware of it in time so we went to work without breakfast but Frank McDermott was left making a fire in the tent. In an attempt to blow on the flames he accidentally caught his head on fire and ran down the embankment and dove into the lake in spite of the cold. He was successful in extinguishing the flames but spent the rest of the day by the fire trying to warm up.

The wind was increasing all day long, with waves soon coming over our dock. At four p.m. it was up to gale force and tents began to go flat or tear up around the settlement. We were forced to quit work

when some of the men were called by their wives to come and save their homes ! We too had to rush to save our own tent, driving down the tent pegs deeper into the ground and putting extra poles and ropes all around it. In spite of the tempest of the day or rather as a fitting conclusion we witnessed a marvellous rainhow at sunset. It was brilliant and extended from horizon to horizon in the east. We all stood in awe of its beauty and Father braved the wind and the rain to go out to the end of the dock to get a picture of it over the new Mission.

It also happened to be Father's Birthdav and all the natives assembled in the tent and presented him with a sort of cake and tea which all shared in.

Saturday: Sept 1st: four inches of snow cover the ground to usher in the month of September with a stout NNW wind. Many of the men took the occasion to harness their teams and go for wood or to hunt. Our cook, Sarah, was sick so the boys did the best they could with what food we have, but it generally revolves around either whitefish or trout. We are hungry for meat of which we have none at present. The Indians are talking of a moose hunt soon.

In spite of the weather we got the wall logs up over the window openings.

Sunday Sept 2nd: A very hard frost on top of the snow on the ground froze all standing water about the camp and even the small lake behind the settlement. Father preached in both Indian and English. For the past two weeks all the people have been talking of « Bani » travellors from afar, referring to the group of their tribe who were supposed to have left Fort Good Hope two weeks before to walk to Colville Lake, over a hundred miles north. Today the smoke signal seen across the lake gave rise to fresh cries of « Bani » and two canoes were dispatched to fetch them in. When the first boatload

arrived we were all on the shore to greet them, about a dozen people in all with one mother carrying her two-year old daughter all that distance on her back, and another grand-mother who came hobbling in sore of foot and who didn't walk again for several weeks. Their many sled dogs were all saddled with packs containing most of the camping gear, and even many pounds of meat from a moose they killed along the way. They had been travelling during some very bad storms and rain and snow and as they were all in mooseskin moccasins and had no rubber foot gear their feet were constantly wet, nor could they dry them at night. We stood in awe of what they had done. The « Bani » turned out to be heroic people indeed.

Monday Sept 3rd: As we brave the higher reaches of the walls of the Mission, now coated with ice and snow, we are beginning to see the end of our precious logs in sight and are using every short and crooked log which we at first rejected. Some of the Bani want to work but we have not enough for all. Father heard seven confessions before the Mass and afterwards gave the five Rochesterians lessons in serving Mass, followed by a lesson in speaking the Rabbit-skin dialect. Later in the evening Father was called to help Sarah, the cook, who was in the throes of some mysterious ailment that caused her to throw herself about in an unconscious state, grinding her teeth etc. Four men were required to hold her. It resembled an epileptic fit. Father gave her 2cc of Demoral and she quieted down and slept. The next day she remembered nothing.

Tuesday Sept 4th: Wind stronger than ever out of the NW with waves crashing over our small wharf. Father shot a raven that had been stealing our fish and the natives said that would produce three days of rain! It is taboo for them to shoot a raven. After breakfast Father took the stitches out of Officially's

leg. It is healing nicely and he has not missed any work over it. These people have never heard of accident compensation. We finally reached the top wall log at noon and Father took a picture of its raising. After that all but four of the men were laid off as we are out of logs. We expect our net is full of rotting fish and probably tied in knots as a result of this storm. And here on the shore our dogs are starving. Barry Haefele has been working on a form for a beautiful cement front steps for the Mission. Bob Haughwout and Frank McDermott are gathering caribou moss to be used later for insulation. Water in the gas caused us a lot of trouble with the chain saw until we discovered the trouble.

In spite of the bad weather the natives are playing their favorite outdoor game « Ayati » which is done with a ball, the women trying to keep it away from the men and vice versa. It gets very rough with huge pileups and bloody noses. The women can well hold their own and are much tougher than are our white women outside.

The gas lamp in the tent went out just at Communion time tonight. Luckily one of the boys had a flashlight which enabled Father to continue giving out Communion in the dark without an interruption. The boys are finding their sleeping bags too thin for these below-freezing nights, when the fire goes out in the tent it gets as cold as outside

All the small willows and lichens have changed to warm colors since our frosts last week. The lake-side is a riot of color and very beautiful.

Wednesday Sept 5th: We woke to a strange quiet. The wind had died! This lull in the weather lasted only a few hours but it gave us the chance we had been waiting for to visit our net and it was full of trout and all twisted up as we had expected. One of the trout weighed over 20 lbs and fed all the dogs. Today we put up the front porch logs and a

crew of five crossed the lake in spite of the rising wind and brought back some valuable logs for us including some dry-pole rafters. Sara has had another attack and we are back to doing our own cooking which is more primitive than that of the Indians.

Thursday, Sept 6th: Cold and windy but in spite of it we poured cement in the front steps form and set the rafters on the Mission ceiling. We received a message through the Aklavik radio station that Bob Inglis will be bringing the rest of our building material next Wednesday.

Friday Sept 7th: Four men cross the lake three miles to cut more spruce. We who stayed at home were pouring more cement, levelling the ceiling rafters and working on the three antenna pole supports. We were snowed on all day and left wet and cold. After supper Father was called to a tent to pull a back tooth from one of the «Bani». It was successful although painful and the Indian was grateful. But it took so long for the water to boil in that tent to sterilize the forceps that the evening Mass was delayed.

During the next few days the weather slowly changed back to normal and by Sunday we saw the sun again although the ground was still covered with snow. Monday we spent on the fish house, 12 x 14 built by the lake shore which will serve as a temporary warehouse when our building material arrives. On Tuesday a plane was seen in the sky and we thought it must be Father LEISING come to install our transmitter but it turned out to be our little Japanese friend Hiroki Sue from Brinmore Pennsylvania up here writing her thesis and going about living in a tent among the Indians.